

THE LAST WORD

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THIS IS A novel for two voices; a duet between a man and a woman who have come to the end of a long engagement. Both give their reasons, in turn, and try to understand how it came to happen. The story is narrated by both the man and the woman, but not as if they were writing a book, but as if they were sharing their thoughts with the reader, who is some kind of judge, or recorder.

Side by side with the theme of a disintegrating love affair is the one about a private war in which the woman is engaged, and which explains her destructive behaviour: her war against Providence, or God, or what you will. She has the last word, but finds she does not want it.

*A prayer of Saint Teresa : “Your Majesty,
it is small wonder that You have so few friends. You
treat them so badly.”*

PART ONE

I WANT YOU to see my side of the story. There is, I suppose, no reason why I should have first crack of the whip, except that in the Book of Genesis a precedent was created whereby Adam was able to get in a good old grouse about the way Eve had loused things up for him, and I see no reason why I shouldn't follow suit. I also want you to see Francia as she really was, because I flatter myself that I knew her better than anyone else alive, and even then she left me standing. I mean, literally. Had we intended getting married in Church, I would have been the guy who was left standing at the altar. As it was, we had to send all the wedding presents back four weeks before the wedding. She will hasten to tell you at this point that it was *I* who rung down the curtain on our idyllic affair, but anyone who knows her (and I thought I did) will know how much truth lies behind that. Even now, though I thank my lucky stars I got out in time, I wonder how I ever let a girl like that go. What we enjoyed together was the best thing I ever knew; forget all you have read about sexual perfection: we invented it. It doesn't bear thinking about, yet I think about nothing else.

"Perfect synchronization, if I might be allowed to say so." This was Francia, with drowsy complaisance, but

still fresh and unflagging even after an hour's strenuous love-making. These were refined words, you might think, coming from a parson's daughter. But that was what I liked most about her; she was so refreshingly proud of her successes, and certainly not ashamed of saying so.

I was not always quite so fresh, and on this occasion I leaned up on my elbow and brushed a strand of dark hair out of her eyes, feeling limp. "When you carefully-brought-up girls kick over the traces you certainly kick them over. It's obvious that you have never been in love before, my girl."

She pulled my face down to hers and covered it with kisses.

"Anyone else would be insulted by a remark like that. Was I so awful?"

"Certainly not. But you throw yourself into it as if you were going to your execution in the morning. You know, 'the condemned man ate a hearty breakfast'. Do you have to eat me alive?"

She smiled at me, with the firelight glowing in her eyes, and on her skin. I could not even then make up my mind whether I thought her actually beautiful or not, but I was surprised to find myself still in love with her, even after four months. A record for me.

"Do you mind?"

I kissed one of her shoulders, and suddenly felt my age.

"My dear, frankly, no. What man would? But you scare me. Don't you feel we ought to leave a little something for dessert?"

"You mean our wedding, I suppose? I'm so afraid

something will happen to prevent it that I have to seize what happiness I can while I can."

"Oh, you of little faith! What could possibly happen to prevent it?"

"The H Bomb, for one thing. You asked for that."

Oh well. It's painful, of course, going over all this. Perhaps it is the masochist in me that makes me get a savage kick out of even this recollection. Even though the H Bomb didn't prevent it she was clairvoyant, right enough. Or she knew herself. So don't get the idea that there was anything funny in all this. When two people come to the end of an engagement as long as ours was they may seem comical to some people, but to themselves they are deadly serious. Though I do now see myself as the figure of fun, in the good old tradition which decrees that the cuckold and the drunk be generally thought of as mirth-provoking. I make myself roar with laughter at the thought of how I let myself be edged out by a certain dumb nit whom it would be unfair, both to him and to me, to describe as my rival. There was simply no competition in that sense. He was a victim of circumstances over which he had no control, by which I mean, of course, Francia. And that brother of hers, Edwin.

Edwin is a bit of a case. He is only a year older than she is, but he treats her as if she were years under twenty-one, which she is not. He is solemn and anxious and without humour; also a member of the Tory Party, so what can you expect? But he has an odd quirk in his make-up, in that though he went to a good public school, and to the younger of our older universities, he cultivates his North Country accent just in order to see

his father-in-law wince, but is conventional down to the seat of his pants. The trouble about him was, that he was always ringing up at damned awkward moments, obviously just to make sure that I was not seducing his sister. Which I usually was. He was suspicious of me, and didn't trust her, which I always considered a tribute to her. But he became a bit of a pest, and there were times when I told him so. For a time, then, he would be more discreet, and give his sister the benefit of the doubt. Then would get consumed with anxiety again, and ring up at the most psychologically fraught moment. Like now, when she had just made her classic remark about the H Bomb, and hadn't got a stitch of clothing on.

She was some minutes answering the phone, not just because she was unclothed but because I did not immediately let her withdraw. Old Edwin, meanwhile, went on waiting. When she lifted the receiver I could see she was a little nervous and breathless; it had taken a deal of living down, being a parson's daughter.

I crossed the room and hovered above her shoulder. I always listened to their conversations, and in any case Edwin always shouted down the telephone, for the whole world to hear.

"I had lunch with Mary today. I promised I would ask you if you felt you could possibly see Wilfrid, sometime. I told her probably not."

"How many times does she have to be told? Of course I'm not going to see him. Why can't they leave me alone?"

"All right. Don't get worked up about it. I just promised I'd ask you, in case you had changed your mind

and felt you could stretch a point."

"Of course I haven't changed my mind! I am not going to be dragged into all that again, and nothing anyone can say will make me."

"All right. Forget it," came Edwin's voice over the wire. "I told her you probably wouldn't. But look here, I've been thinking. Why don't you come and stay here for a bit, with me and Shirley? Just until after the wedding. I don't like to think of you being alone in that flat."

"Don't you trust me or something?" murmured Francia, and I slid my hand gently up her arm inside the sleeve of the dressing-gown she had hastily pulled on.

"Of course I trust you," snapped Edwin, sounding quite nasty. "Only if Reynolds is determined to see you he won't wait indefinitely for your permission. I don't want to alarm you—but why tempt Providence?"

"I'll think about it. Thanks for asking me, anyway."

As we came together again I was doubled up with laughter and collapsed in a heap on her bed. Something about Edwin's touching anxiety made me roar, until I began to realize that I was giving a solo performance, and that she was not laughing. And it occurred to me that she had been a bit worried looking, on and off, for days. But I had stupidly thought it was tied up with her forthcoming wedding, and giving up her old job, and so on. So I asked, not really wanting to know: "What was all that about?"

But she fobbed me off, as usual. "Nothing."

She moved away from me and began silently to put on her clothes. Unable, ever, to get used to the pleasure this sight always gave me I stood and watched her with